A New Islander Profile

by G. E. Mortimore

'GET A PIECE OF LAND'

"I'M afraid of no man, and very few women," says 80-year-old Stanley A. G. Crittenden.

Merchant, real estate operator and man-about-the-racetrack, he boasts that he went to school only one day in his life.

He made three fortunes on the prairie, by hard work and the soft sell.

"I spent the other two, so that I could go back to work," he says. "I love work." And he gives a throaty chuckle and shifts the angle of his cigar.

He is retired now, and doesn't mind confessing that he is comfortably fixed.

"I'm still eating well up on the hog," he says. "I don't owe a cent that I know of. I've carried as high as 70 or 80 cents in my pocket. Heh! Heh! And the only collector that calls at the door is the paper boy."

He is a tall, lantern-jawed man with a flair for salty figures of speech. He has devoted his life to sewing machines, real estate, cars, horses and the pursuit of enjoyment.

"For a common joker just off the back, 50s, I've had a lot of fun," he says.

And he proves it by delving into a pile of photographs and picking out a print that shows him in a room with a party of people and two horses, the people obviously enjoying themselves, the horses rather glassy-eyed. It was the celebration for the Roman chariot race which Mr. Crittenden promoted in Weyburn, Sask.

"We fed those horses champagne all night," he chuckles. "Got 'em drunk."

"I bought 54 pieces of property in Regina, in 60 days. I bought 'em so fast I forgot about one house, until a fella came up to me and wanted to pay rent."

"If I make a statement, I want to prove it. I take delight in that, and I defy contradiction."

"I've sold as many as 26 sewing machines in a week, and I can prove it.

"I've seen me get up in the morning, go up to Lake Winnipegosis for a picnic, stay there all night, get up in the morning and sell nine machines . . . sell 'em as fast as I could uncrate them, I sold 'em."

SECRET OF SUCCESS

"The best way to get business is to deserve it, and service is the secret of success. Nobody will talk me out of them two things. First, you've got to sell yourself.

"When I was selling real estate, they'd ask me why I'd bother fussing around and fixing things up after a sale was made. They said, 'You've got it sold, why do all that.' And I said, 'Gawd, it's the best advertising you can get.' You follow me?

"My biggest asset is this vacant look I have on my face. Heh! Heh! Yes.

"I never pushed my foot in a door in my life. 'Lady, I'm selling sewing machines, I supose you have one?' That's what I'd say. If she invited me in, the minute I went in I started looking at the pictures on the wall, and talking about them.

"'What kind of sewing machines are you selling?' she'd ask. I'd tell her, and I'd admire some more of the pictures, and say, 'Who's this?' and 'Who's that?'

"By the time I got around the room, she'd sold herself. The soft-pedal stuff is what works. Heh! Heh! Lay the cards on the table, and my goods is all in the window."

His relaxed approach and zeal for hard work earned him the position of manager for Singer Sewing Machine Co. for southern Manitoba — a position he quit several times because he could make more money selling than as an executive.

He was born in Walkerton, Bruce County, Ontario. "Instead of going to school I went out for $5 a month peddling milk to 130 customers. I was the youngest of 10 and we all had to eat. We couldn't buy leggings for a humming-bird."

The family moved to a farm in Manitoba. "The morning I was 18, I had my hand on the door of the land title office at 4 a.m. to get a homestead. Near Dauphin.

"I broke the first 10 acres with a cow, an ox, a pony, a scrub-breaker. I cleared 80 acres myself. That was the finest thing I ever did in my life for my health. I resembled a stall-fed knitting

STANLEY A. G. CRITTENDEN

needle until then, but that made a man of me—physically, mentally, morally, every other way.

"I lived on corn meal many a day, and porridge, cutting the scrub, digging out the roots and breaking it.

"My advice to young men is, 'Get yourself a piece of land somewhere.' Gawd, they dunno what work is. Lord, it paid me big dividends. It'll do the same for anybody. But it's all play, no work now.

"Some of these young fellas that's out there stealing . . . If they were out on a farm, and they didn't make a dollar, only their board, they'd be better off."

"It wasn't the homesteader that made the money, as a rule," he admitted. "When he got finished, he'd be so fed up that he'd sell at any price."

While he still had the homestead, he bought a home in Dauphin, for $800, on terms. "I remember thinking that if I ever get this paid for, I'd be some punkins, with a farm and a house in town."

Eventually he sold his homestead for $2,800. He worked for a butcher, then sold real estate, with spectacular success, and began investing in real estate himself.

"It wasn't long before I had 96 pieces of property in Dauphin, and I only had clear title to one of them, a pair of vacant lots. I bought everything I could pay a payment on. It might have ruined me for life . . . I was lucky enough. I sold and got out all right; made $4,000.

"I had a string of good racehorses—I was one of the few who made money at it, I remember. And I've won eight firsts, one second with horses, at the fair in one day.

"The only time I was ever cheated in a horse deal in my life was by a Presbyterian minister. I was at a race meet when a great big fella comes up to me and says: 'I've a horse you should have. I'm the Presbyterian minister, and the congregation would not allow me to race him.

"'But I can hitch him to a jump-seat buggy, and he'll step a mile in 2.25 on a country road.' Well, if he could do that, he could do 2.10 on a track. 'If he's that good, I'll buy him.' I said.

"Next day we tried him out. Fast? He couldn't beat a fat man up a lane. The fella with me lay down on his back and rolled about with laughter. That horse couldn't beat his mother."

Among other activities, Mr. Crittenden won dog and horse races, drove a trotter to a world's record, raised prize cattle, managed cup-winning baseball and hockey teams and was conductor of a band (although he didn't know a note of music), built Weyburn, Sask., race track, and organized a Roman chariot race with chariots that were exact replicas of the originals of centuries before.

"They offered me $275 a day to race the Roman chariots on the Class A fair circuit, but I couldn't go, because I had two big stores to look after: a piano store, a Chrysler franchise and a Singer sewing machine store."

Sewing machines were his chief business for 18 years. He did so well with his Singer agency in Dauphin that within a year he was named Singer's manager for southern Manitoba.

He quit this post to open and run Singer stores in several Manitoba and Saskatchewan towns. In Morden, Man., he felt inclined to quit and go selling real estate, and he wrote two letters of resignation, without receiving a reply. Finally he wrote a third letter, in which he said: "You'll find the keys to the store in the drug store on Feb. 28."

Then they induced him to take over the agency in Dauphin—although there was a competent agent there already. By the time he reached Dauphin, the agent was on his way to a new post in Peace River.

Mr. Crittenden won a gold medal for the all-time record sales for Canada. He carries it around and displays it proudly.

He says he was lenient with people who had bought a machine and couldn't pay. But he was tough on people who seemed to be trying to pull a fast deal. Once he was attacked with a knife by a man who didn't want him to remove a machine. But he prentended to have a revolver, and bluffed his way past half a dozen men who stood between him and the door.

One man who had kept a machine nine years, refused to give it up. Mr. Crittenden, not a man to waste time on formalities, borrowed an axe and smashed the machine to scrap iron.

After he left Singer he became provincial supervisor for all Saskatchewan for National Schools of Los Angeles, an institute that trained students in mechanical and electronic trades. He held this post seven years, then went back selling real estate.

SENSED SWINDLE

Earlier, he was commissioned by a syndicate of land-buyers to look over some land in the Rio Grande Valley that was being offered for sale at several hundred dollars an acre. He sensed that it was a swindle. He was the only man in the whole party who didn't buy a single acre, and the only man who didn't lose every cent.

He came to Victoria in semi-retirement 15 years ago; worked for a time selling real estate, then retired altogether.

He has won a number of snooker tournaments. One of his favorite tricks is to go into a place where he isn't known, pretend to be a beginner, and astonish people by winning in a spectacular way.

Mr. Crittenden's conversation is sprinkled with such phrases as "He couldn't sell gold dollars for a dime," and "He's so mean, he'd skin a louse for its hide and tallow."

He likes to look at pictures of his numerous well-shaped and speedy horses; his dog, "Danger," with which he won races in Brandon; his racing cars, and other reminders of his lively career.

Mr. Crittenden, a former Weyburn alderman, has frank contempt for what he considers to be the moss-grown, sluggish performance of Victoria's civic leaders.

"On the prairie, when people are dead, they bury them," he says. "Here they walk around.

"You show me a village of 300 people on the prairie that hasn't got a race track. The track here is just a bull ring. In the first year of harness racing, I never saw a day out there when a horse didn't fall. Then, Victoria turned down that offer of an exhibition grounds. Now I see they're planning to have a Class B fair here. A Class B fair is for the likes of Langford—a place that size."

"I never seen the day I couldn't get work, if I wanted it," he says, talking of unemployment. "I'll bet anyone $100 I'll go out and get a job before night, any time."